



NEWS RELEASE

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CITY OF FREEPORT NAMED “COMMUNITY OF THE YEAR” BY THE UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE RURAL DEVELOPMENT

November 6, 2003, Freeport, FL — The United States Department of Agriculture Rural Development today honored the City of Freeport in Walton County as the 2003 winner of Florida’s “Rural Community of the Year” award. Freeport was selected as the top rural community in Florida for its diligent and successful initiatives in sustainable community and economic development. “The residents and leaders of Freeport are to be commended for their continuing efforts in building a viable sustainable community that serves its residents well,” said Charles W. Clemons, Sr., State Director USDA Rural Development.

The City of Freeport’s nomination for the award showcased the community’s long-term commitment and infrastructure initiatives that reflect overwhelming support of its residents. The city’s corporate limits encompass approximately 10 square miles with almost 1300 citizens, but the city serves as a town center for a number of smaller unincorporated communities in a 60 square mile area with a service population estimated at nearly 5,000 people.

Incorporated in 1963, Freeport developed plans for centralized community water facilities funded through a \$210,000 loan from USDA Rural Development, known at the time as USDA Farmer’s Home Administration. Since that time over \$9.875 million in water improvements/expansions have occurred with Rural Development providing 88-percent of the funding. From a base of 500 water customers in 1991, today there are over 2,600 customers and 590,000 distribution lines, a 400-percent increase in 10 years.

Also recognizing the critical need for centralized waste water collection and treatment, the City commissioned a wastewater management plan that became the basis for the system that came online in 1991. Of the total \$2.5 million initial development cost, Rural Development provided approximately \$1.5 million in loan and grant assistance. With an initial customer load of 290, the system currently serves 540 customers with continued growth expected. Further expansion to accommodate anticipated construction of 500 to 700 new homes within the next 12 to 24 months will be funded through developer paid impact fees.

Sustainability is a challenge facing small communities, but rural areas throughout the State of Florida have responded by working toward achieving economic opportunity and quality of life for their residents. In addition to financial assistance provided by USDA Rural Development for infrastructure development in Freeport, Rural Development has also provided assistance in affordable rental housing. Additionally, Freeport has utilized State of Florida funding to develop a volunteer fire department and a community center. Today the city has a library built through community efforts, schools equipped with future growth capacity, and parks and recreation facilities with plans for future expansion.

State Director Clemons said, “I also want to commend the leaders and the citizens of Freeport for the many accomplishments that have been realized that benefit not only Freeport, but the surrounding communities as

well. Freeport is an example of economic and community development occurring hand-in-hand, benefiting its residents economically, socially and culturally. With their smaller populations, rural areas often have greater difficulty financing and maintaining much needed infrastructure, but Freeport successfully demonstrates that size and limited resources are not barriers to accomplishing goals designed to improve the quality of life for its citizens and community.”

The Rural Community of the Year Award is presented annually to recognize rural communities that have engaged in significant efforts to improve the quality of life of their citizens. Freeport received a commemorative plaque from USDA Rural Development, reading: “2003 Rural Community Development Award acknowledges the City of Freeport as the Rural Community of the Year for outstanding achievements in carrying out a comprehensive program of sustainable community and economic development that has resulted in tangible improvements in the quality of life for its residents.”

USDA Rural Development serves as the lead Federal entity for rural development needs and administers financial and technical assistance to improve the quality of life for rural residents. Further information on USDA Rural Development can be obtained by contacting any USDA Service Center or by visiting USDA's web site at <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/fl>

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